

The dynamics of transit migration: Insights into the migration process of sub-Saharan African migrants heading for Europe

DRAFT VERSION

About the author

Joris Schapendonk is a PhD candidate at the department of Human Geography, Radboud University Nijmegen The Netherlands. His research project focuses on the non-linear character of sub-Saharan African migration and he discusses the subject in the framework of the migration and development debate. He investigates the immobility of particular groups of sub-Saharan African (transit) migrants on their way to Europe and the extreme mobility of sub-Saharan African migrants in Europe. This is done in order to understand what mobility, as an integral part of human life, means for traditional notions of development.

Abstract

This empirical study analyzes the migration process of sub-Saharan Africans heading for Europe in the framework of the theoretical concept of transit migration. It focuses on the organization and facilitation of migration and the sharing of information among migrants in their process of migrating. The study aims to get more insights into the dynamics of transit migration and migrants' (in)dependencies and (im)mobilities during their journey. In contrast to other in-depth studies on sub-Saharan African transit migration, this analysis includes the migration process after the migrant's arrival in Europe. It has a broader geographical perspective since it is based on fieldwork in Senegal, Morocco and Spain.

The study shows that the social networks of migrants are often not sufficient to fulfill their migration process; most transit migrants need (professional) assistance for specific parts of the journey. Moreover, migrants form collectives to create some protection 'en route'. However, despite these and other dependencies and constraints, transit migrants are, in essence, highly flexible in achieving their goals and changing their plans. Their migration process reflects often a 'spontaneous' character and consists of repeated moves and temporal, both voluntary and involuntary, settlements. When seen from this perspective, the migration process can be understood in terms of mobility with its dynamics and constraints, instead of a single and linear movement to a new and permanent destination.

Introduction

One longstanding misconception regarding migration is that it is generally seen as a simple move from an origin to a destination (Skeldon 1997). Migration, however, is often much more dynamic in reality. This becomes particularly clear when migration from sub-Saharan Africa towards Europe is taken into account. A considerable number of migrants from this region lacks financial means and appropriate travel documents to reach Europe directly from their countries of origin. Furthermore, the EU's restrictive migration policies 'block' the direct pathways to the North. For these reasons, many sub-Saharan African migrants must cross several countries to reach the borders of Europe; this journey takes months or years instead of several days or weeks. The entering of a state in order to travel on to another is mainly conceptualized as transit migration (Baldwin-Edwards 2006; de Haas 2006; Papadopoulou 2005; Düvell 2006).

With the emergence of transit migration there seems to be growing academic interest in the migration process of people (the act of migrating). Traditionally, this act was more or less neglected in migration research. The main focus in social science was on the two ending sides of migration; the decision making process before migrating at the beginning stage and the impact of migration on host (and sending) societies at the ending side of migration (International Migration Institute 2006). This has changed slightly in the framework of transit migration since some researchers have examined the overland migration process and the 'transit phase' of sub-Saharan African migrants with an in-depth approach. Examples are; Hamood (2006) in the case of sub-Saharan African migration through Libya, Collyer (2006) in the case of undocumented African migrants in Morocco and Brachet (2005) in the case of trans-Saharan migration through Niger and Algeria. These studies provide valuable insights into migration methods and the experiences of migrants in temporary host countries. However, they generally have a limited geographical scope; they describe a particular step of the journey and the analyses end just outside Europe. Moreover, although the studies provide in-depth insights into the migration process, they do not analyze the organization and facilitation of the migration process extensively.¹

This empirical study analyzes the migration process by using a broader approach. Firstly, the analysis has a broader geographical perspective than the studies mentioned above. It is based on fieldwork in three different countries; Spain, Morocco and Senegal.² Therefore, this analysis of the migration process does not end at the fringes of Europe. Secondly, unlike the other studies, this research focuses on the 'working' of the migration process rather than on the experiences of migrants during the process. Thereby, the central objective of this study is to analyze the migration process by focusing on migration networks, migration facilitators and the sharing of

information among migrants in order to gain insights into the dynamics of transit migration and migrants' (in)dependencies and (im)mobilities during their process of migrating.

The findings are based on semi-structured interviews, non-structured interviews and social talks with sub-Saharan African migrants. In addition, academic experts, NGO representatives and professionals working with migrants have been interviewed in order to understand the broader context of the situation in the three countries. The fieldwork has been conducted in these particular countries since they have specific characteristics with respect to sub-Saharan African migration. Senegal is primarily viewed as an important sending country, Morocco primarily as a transit country and Spain is considered most importantly as a destination country. However, it should be mentioned that these categorizations are much more blurred in reality; all three countries are, to some extent, sending, transit and receiving countries at the same time. Finally, it is important to note that it is impossible to outline the migration process of all sub-Saharan African migrants. The group of migrants heading for Europe is too heterogeneous; the causes and aims of their migration projects differ as well as their personal characteristics, their regions of origin, migration routes and migration means. This study attempts therefore to give merely some insights into the migration process of sub-Saharan Africans traveling through West and North Africa in order to reach Europe. It is not intended to outline the migration process of African migrants in general.

Before starting the analysis, the concept of transit migration and its difficulties is briefly outlined below in order to provide a better understanding of the theoretical implications of the concept.

Transit migration: Some difficulties of the concept

Transit migration emerged as a concept in the beginning of the 1990s and referred mainly to migration from Eastern to Western Europe. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, many Eastern Europeans tried to reach the wealthier parts of the continent. Because of the 'illegal' character of this migration, the concept is often used as an equivalent for irregular migration. It is mainly for this reason that the concept is highly politicized (Düvell 2006) since it is primarily perceived as a European threat (Baldwin-Edwards 2006). It is often written that 'masses of people' or 'hundred thousands of migrants' are waiting at the Eastern as well as the Southern border zones of Europe in order to enter the continent 'illegally'. However, these estimations are based on questionable methods such as multiplier applications. In addition, many of these transit migrants aim to enter Europe while it is never certain, at least not a priori, whether they actually manage to do so

(Düvell 2006; de Haas 2006). Consequently, the number of transit migrants towards Europe is extremely difficult to count.

The fact that transit migration is stated as a ‘threat just outside the border’ also assumes that this phenomenon exists only from areas outside Europe towards this political entity. This will be disproved by the analysis below. The illegal character of transit migration is another aspect that has to be nuanced. Although it is obvious that a considerable number of migrants are attempting to enter Europe illegally from transit areas, it is wrong to label all transit migration as ‘illegal’. It consists of a wide range of categories of migrants, including both regular and irregular migrants, as well as political refugees and asylum seekers (Nyberg Sørensen 2006).

Finally, by explaining the politicization of transit migration, a reflecting note on the Eurocentric approach is necessary. In the context of South-North migration there is a widespread misconception that all sub-Saharan African migrants migrating northwards are heading for Europe. This is highly inaccurate since intra-regional migration between sub-Saharan African and North African countries has been common for centuries and for many sub-Saharan African migrants North African countries are their desired destination, particularly Libya. Others are attempting, but not managing to enter Europe and they decide to settle in perceived transit areas as a second best option (de Haas 2006, 2007; Carling 2007; Düvell 2006). In fact, South-South migration transcends South-North migration in volume and significance. For these reasons, migration related policies in the South, if existent, focuses more on intra-regional migration than on migration dynamics towards Europe (Zoomers and van Naerssen 2006).

Not only is transit migration a politicized concept, but there are also epistemological, methodological and empirical difficulties related to it. Düvell (2006), for instance, stresses the issue of drawing the dividing line between transit migration and repeated or multiple migration. According to him, many authors inaccurately interpret migrants who move on to another country as ‘transit’ even after a long stay in their host country. This contradicts several evidence-based migration theories: cumulative causation, culture of migration. These studies prove that “once someone migrates, the more he or she is likely to continue migrating” (Düvell 2006).

Another interesting methodological difficulty outlined by Düvell is the difference between actual transit migration and mental transit migration. As stated above, not all migrants who intend to go to Europe actually reach Europe. For this reason, often used interview methods in (transit) migration related research cannot automatically be taken for granted since this method implies an a priori presumption that these people are actually transiting to Europe. At the same time a post hoc research design (interviewing former transit migrants in the destination country)

for investigating transit migration brings in other methodological concerns, because then the actual state of being in transit is not investigated, but the migrant's reconstruction of the transit period (Düvell 2006).

As a result, there is a growing consensus that transit migration should not be understood as a status or as a specific type of migration. Instead, transit migration introduces a continuum in the migration process. Thereby, the concept does not imply a continuous process of moving, it shows that migration has often a step-wise character of moving and staying (Papadopoulou 2005; de Haas 2007; Düvell 2006).

1. The migration process in Africa: migration networks, collectives and information sharing

West Africa has a very long tradition of migration. It has often been noted that migration should be seen as a way of life in this region because nomadism and state-overarching communities are embedded in daily life. Moreover, the ECOWAS protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, the Right of Residence and Establishment, makes international migration between (most of) the West African countries legal. Citizens from ECOWAS countries can travel without a visa between the member states and reside in them for 90 days. The protocol also allows people to apply for a permanent resident paper, when these 90 days have expired (de Haas 2006; Adepoju 2002).

Hybrid networks

One of the consequences resulting from the migration tradition is the existence of well-developed migration related services. Often local transport businesses carry migrants along ancient trade routes. Furthermore, other migration related businesses, such as money transfer agencies and communication centers, have emerged along migration routes (Lahlou 2007). Another consequence stemming from the migration culture is that the transportation and/or 'smuggling' of migrants within states and across African state-borders, is, in general, viewed as a normal and informal economic activity rather than an illegal act (Interview 2007). A clear exception is the trafficking of women and children in and from the region. In West Africa, and particularly in Sahelian countries, it is not uncommon to send family members away to look for work in other places. Nevertheless, the authorities are (more and more) viewing the arrangement and recruitment mechanisms for this type of migration as a serious form of crime (Ndione and Broekhuis 2006; Adepoju 2005). This issue is later further outlined.

Reliable contacts and information are extremely important in the migration process. For this reason, migration networks consist primarily of social contacts linked to each other by migrants themselves; the social network. Most of the time, these social networks are no longer sufficient for people to migrate, because migrants do not have contacts in all of the ‘migration hubs’³ (Interview 2007). Moreover, migrants need assistance for specific parts of their journey. For instance, the crossing of the Sahara or false travel documents cannot be arranged without the help of a third person. As a Congolese migrant in Rabat stated:

“They cannot cross the Sahara bare-footed. So they need other persons to arrange the journey.”

A Togolese migrant indicated that his social network was not sufficient to fulfill his migration process and therefore he needed assistance:

“I didn’t know anybody in Tamanrasset [Algeria]. So I first went looking for a ‘guide’ who could help me to get in contact with the right persons.”

Since this group of migrants needs (professional) assistance for some parts of their journeys, migration networks are, in this context, best described as hybrid networks consisting of migrants’ personal contacts and ‘in-between-persons’ who facilitate migration processes. Contrary to many policymakers’ beliefs, the majority of recent academic research on transit migration emphasizes the informal and often local character of the migration related services. For instance, Collyer writes the following regarding transit migrants in Morocco:

“All the migrants who were interviewed reported paying for assistance on certain legs of the journey. Without exception, this assistance was small in scale and local in nature and did not reflect the image of large-scale trafficking operations that are often cited by policy-makers in this area.”

(Collyer 2006)

In the framework of sub-Saharan African migration to Italy via Libya, Hamood writes:

“Respondents describe a system in which individuals or small groups of individuals cooperate for mutual financial interest.”

...

“For the most part..., it seems that there is little, if any, coordination between the smugglers at different parts of the journey to Italy (through the desert, within Libya, across the sea).”
(Hamood 2006)

De Haas concludes in the framework of West African migration:

“Smugglers are usually not part of international organized crime, but tend to be locally based and operate alone or in relatively small, flexible networks. Migrants travel in stages and typically pay smugglers for one difficult leg of the journey.”
(de Haas 2007)

Thus, the assistance offered to migrants during their migration process in Africa does, in general, not reflect the Western notion of large-scale, well-organized and criminal networks. The networks are much more diffuse and the assistance is often embedded in normal economic activities.

In addition, the act of ‘smuggling’ is not always perceived as a crime; it is sometimes formulated as a ‘crime without a victim’ meaning that it is an act of assistance the migrant has asked for. It differs from trafficking in the fundamental sense that smuggling does not imply forms of exploitation (van Liempt and Doornik 2006). Consequently, there are different perceptions of human smuggling; policy makers may approach smuggling as serious forms of illegal acts, whereas at the same time migrants may view the same activities as necessary and helpful forms of assistance. This is in line with the conclusions drawn in Van Liempt’s study on human smuggling. Her study shows that “the boundaries of helpers and smugglers are fluid, and that there is no such thing as the prototypical smuggler” (van Liempt 2007). She also concludes that migrants are not passive victims in the smuggling process; usually they do have agency. To indicate this, she distinguishes the following three types of interaction between the migrant and the smuggler that can also function in combination:

- 1) The service type: Migrants have a fixed destination and smugglers bring them there.
- 2) The directive type: Migrants are going where the smugglers take them; some migrants have no preferences on where to go, some are overruled by their smugglers and are therefore not going where they intended to go and some migrants are misled by their smugglers and end up in a different place than they had intended to.
- 3) The negotiable type: Smugglers offer migrants several opportunities with different prices and migrants are in the position to choose the best option. They can measure the costs and benefits of the risks involved.

(van Liempt 2007).

The local and ‘non-criminal’ character of migration assistance, as outlined above, has also been confirmed by an interview held with the Head of Mission of the UNHCR in Rabat, as he described most services as ‘a friendly helping hand’. However, he appropriately stated that this does not automatically mean that criminal networks and human trafficking networks are non-existent in the migration scene (Interview 2007).

Migration as organized crime

Although the above section emphasizes the small-scale character of migration related activities, it is also noticed that the organization of the migration processes is becoming more professional. Due to several difficulties during the journey and the increased restrictive EU migration policies, a considerable number of migrants is more and more dependent on well-structured and coordinated migration networks. Therefore, the growing concern about the involvement of organized criminal networks in the sub-Saharan African migration scene seems to be justified. As Baldwin-Edwards outlines, “organized crime has greatly benefited from European restrictions on immigration, originally by merely facilitating the illegal entry of immigrants as a short-term commercial arrangement” (Baldwin-Edwards 2002). A recent publication of the UNODC focuses on the issue of criminal migration networks (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2006). This document pays special attention to the so-called ‘full packet operators’, who plan and coordinate most or all aspects of the journey. Often Nigerian groups are associated with these acts of violation.

Moreover, the increased presence of irregular Asian transit migrants in West and North Africa heading for Europe indicates that there are international smuggling networks involved. According to Interpol, Africa is becoming more and more a transit area for Asian migrants, particularly from China. Much of this migration seems to be connected to South Asian criminal networks (<http://www.interpol.int/Public/THB/PeopleSmuggling/Default.asp>, 22-4-2006). There is one example of 57 Pakistani with legal (not fake) business visas. They turned out to be young men (16-18 years old) from rural areas with no business experience at all, and they stated that they had been recruited in their hometowns (Interview 2007). According to a representative of the International Office for Migration (IOM) in Dakar, these kinds of activities, and there are numerous examples,⁴ prove the well-organized and sometimes global structure of the smuggling process, with, in the case of legal visa provisions, even linkages to the embassy level (Interview 2007).

When criminal involvements in the migration scene are discussed, the issue of human trafficking needs to be further outlined. Adepoju (2005) describes the gradual increase in trafficking of humans to and from Africa, as well as within the continent which includes the trafficking of children mainly within the West African region. This region is an important “transit zone” for trafficked women to Europe. Ghana, for instance, is a transit route for Nigerian women trafficked to Italy and Germany. Another example is Mali serving as a transit country for trafficking people to France. Although trafficking is generally associated with illegal migration to Europe, the Gulf states and South Africa are also mentioned as being important destination countries for trafficked persons (Adepoju 2005).

For the West African region, all ECOWAS members agreed on a declaration to combat the trafficking of people in 2001. Since then governmental bodies have designed laws and policies relating to this matter. Mali was the first country which adopted a ‘National Plan to Fight against Child Trafficking’ (Ndione and Broekhuis 2006). The National Assembly of Senegal approved recently (March 2005) a comprehensive draft of an anti-trafficking bill. This bill complements the full-range of protection services for victims of human trafficking that the government has been providing since 2003. In Nigeria, a National Agency for the Prohibition of Traffic in Persons and other Related Matters (NAPTIP) has been established to implement the anti-trafficking law of 2003 (de Haas 2006). The anti-trafficking law in Burkina Faso has been active since 2004 and the government has also signed bilateral agreements on anti-trafficking with Ivory Coast and Mali (Ndione and Broekhuis 2006).

During our fieldwork, the growing complexity of distinguishing between the informal, local activities related to migration from well-organized illegal activities was particularly striking. Often “big businessmen” are using local actors for their smuggling activities. In Saint Louis (Senegal) for instance, there are several “barons” active in arranging journeys to the Canary Islands. Based on interviews with local inhabitants, IOM representatives and NGO members, we can say that these barons earn huge sums of money with their “dubious businesses”, without risking the voyage themselves. They buy boats from local fishermen and make them (the fishermen) their captains for a set sea-crossing. In this way the activities of the local actors become more embedded in larger organized (and illegal) activities.

Our empirical findings lead us to think that many transit migrants neither rely only on non-criminal and small scale operating actors, nor do they rely only on large scale criminal networks.

They frequently use the migration means and parts of networks which fit best with the particular step of their journey. As one migrant stated: “Sometimes they need the help of a smuggler to cross a border and sometimes they just take a regular bus to get from A to B” (Interview 2007). Therefore, it is inappropriate to presume that (most) transit migrants are victims of large criminal smuggling networks. On the other hand, it is also naive to think that all migration related activities have a non-criminal, local and uncoordinated character.

The migration facilitators in Africa

Because transit migrants use hybrid networks to migrate, this section attempts to describe the different actors within these networks. Four actors are distinguished: transporters, navigators, recruiters and the migrant him- or herself.

The role of the transporters is one in which they bring migrants from one place to another. In the case of maritime routes (for instance Senegal-Canary Islands), the transporter or ‘captain’ is often a migrant as well. When the shore of the Canary Islands has been reached, he joins the other migrants and leaves the pirogue and the equipment - motors, GPS systems, etc. - behind (Interview 2007, see also Carling 2007). This means that for almost every sea-crossing a new boat must be built. It is therefore not surprising that the ‘pirogue’ producing industry in Saint Louis is booming. The ‘captain’ often does not pay for his journey; instead he is obliged to buy food for the people on board. The number of people on board usually varies from between 50 and 100 (Kohnert 2007). It is widely known that the maritime journey can be lengthy. A Senegalese migrant in Granada reported that the sea crossing from Dakar to Tenerife took at least eight days (Interview 2007). It is also well-known that the sea crossing is risky and that many lives are lost along the way. According to the BBC, approximately 6000 African migrants have died or have gone missing in 2006 while attempting to reach the Canary Islands (BBC, news message from 28-12-2006).

Transporting migrants over land is often a structural economic activity, executed by third persons (non-migrants). In ‘migration hubs’, several migration related transport businesses have emerged. In most cases, four-wheel drive vehicles are used to transport groups of migrants (25-40 people) through the Sahara desert. Regarding the desert crossing to Libya, the use of lorries is also mentioned, carrying between 150 to 300 people through the same desert (Hamood 2006). Furthermore, one respondent mentioned that sometimes this “most difficult step” of the migration process is made with the help of camel convoys (Interview 2007).

Before departure, migrants have to wait for days, weeks or even months in the migration hubs. The length of the waiting period depends, among other things, on migrants' financial resources and the number of other clients for the available transport companies. During this period they are generally accommodated in one of the city's ghettos.⁵ This is often an extra source of income for the transporter, since they also often rent rooms to migrants (Brachet 2005).

In addition to the transporters, navigators are also of vital importance in the migration process. These actors mainly plan and coordinate the migration process and are based in Europe, the home country or in places en route in Africa (Oumar BA 2007). We found an example of a religious organization in Morocco which coordinates the migration process for individual migrants and groups of migrants. One of the people involved in the organization had the following to say about their activities:

“I often receive emails from people who want to migrate from my country and I try to help them to get in contact with the right persons...Like today we [he and his assistant] received an email that a truck of 30 people is stuck in the middle of the desert ... we are trying to help these people with the contacts we have...Sometimes we even go and look for these people by ourselves...We arrange the contact between the migrants and their ‘helpers’.”

During this interview their activities appear to be more a friendly helping hand than that they represent a strict organized (criminal) group. The assistance they provide was based on solidarity and economic profit seemed to be unimportant. In this respect, it is also stated that migration navigators are sometimes family members or friends with experience in migration and/or with necessary contacts in the places en route (Interview 2007, see also Oumar BA 2007).

The third type of actor is the recruiter. These actors are actively looking for migrants to join a particular step of the journey (Oumar BA 2007). We found an example in Saint Louis (Senegal) of a person that was recruiting migrants among the Senegalese population and transit migrants from other African countries. He was ‘managing’ the journey of five pirogues under the supervision of the ‘grand-mariner’, who functions in this case as the migration navigator. Other researchers give similar examples (Kohnert 2007; Oumar BA 2007).

The activities of the migration recruiters can be an autonomous economic activity or they can be embedded in broader economic activities. For instance, Brachet (2005) mentions the role of so-called coaxers acting around the checkpoint of the Agadez city. These bus-boys follow

migrants and take them to the transport agencies after they have paid their entry tax. These coaxers do not focus only on migrants, but try to find any kind of passenger.

The main objective of the navigators and recruiters is to arrange contacts between migrants and their transporters/smugglers. But migrants can turn into important migration facilitators as well. Firstly for themselves, since migrants have to look for the right people for continuing their journey. Secondly, some migrants can become important facilitating actors for fellow migrants. Based on interviews with migrants and representatives of local NGOs in Morocco, we can say that migrants who have already reached Morocco often go back to the border area to “guide” migrants through the Algerian-Moroccan border (see also Collyer 2006). In this way, they earn some money. Another example of a migrant, who is a facilitating actor for others as well, is the captain of the pirogues which embark for the Canary Islands.

Thus, migration processes of sub-Saharan African transit migrants are partly facilitated by ‘third persons’. To categorize these people as smugglers is too simplistic since different actors with different roles in the migration process can be distinguished.

Migration collectives and the sharing of information

Often transit migrants create their own migration collectives during their journey. Brachet (2005) characterizes these collectives as “a specific form of territoriality...based on a acute sense of distance (otherness/exteriority) vis-à-vis the environment they cross”. These collectives are usually formed for a certain phase of the migration process in order to finance that particular step (e.g. the crossing of the Sahara) or as a form of protection against a hostile social environment (Interview 2007; Brachet 2005). As one respondent explained:

“People are always traveling in groups. The group varies from 15 to 20 people sometimes 30. It is much safer that way...Individuals are much easier victims of cheats and police violence.”

Collyer (2006) also outlines the protective role of the migrant collectives as he describes them as important survival strategies for migrants reducing risk of individuals and creating mutual solidarity among migrants. Based on several interviews we can say that solidarity is widely shared within the collectives; migrants keep each other updated on security issues, transport opportunities and the availability of jobs. However, mostly the solidarity within migration collectives is not everlasting. There is one important aspect of the migration process among

which great secrecy and even competition exists, namely information about a possibility to make the ‘final jump’ to Europe. According to local humanitarian organizations in Morocco, migrants are very reluctant to share information on this issue, fearing the competition of other migrants. The greater the numbers of people knowing about an opportunity to go to Europe, the less chance you have to make use of that opportunity since fellow migrants may “take your place.” Therefore, many migrants arrange their ‘final jump’ without informing their fellow migrants, as one NGO representative described:

“People go out at night to seek for opportunities to go to Europe. They do not tell their friends, and one day they have just disappeared.”

This section indicates that migrant collectives have a short term character in order to overcome a particular step of the journey. However, our findings also show that some collectives are more long lasting. Sometimes, groups of people decide to start migrating together from the very beginning. In Oujda (Morocco), for instance, we spoke to a Ghanaian migrant traveling with a group of eight friends from his home town. He organized all different steps of the journey together with his friends (sadly enough two of his friends died during the crossing of the desert). In Spain, we also found an example of a ‘Piso Patera’⁶, a migration collective formed on board of the patera (pateras are the ‘famous’ small boats migrants are carried with to the European shores. In Francophone context these boats are called pirogues), which remains active even after arrival in Spain. Nowadays, this Piso Patera, a group of around 15 persons with different nationalities, provides information and support in relation to work and proper housing (Interview 2007).

Another example of more long lasting migrant collectives is the forming of groups by migrants during their ‘waiting period’ in Morocco. To provide more insights into the dynamics of these collectives, the case of migrant groups in Oujda is outlined below.

Security, information and migrants’ organization structure: The case of Oujda

In 2002 an estimated 10,000 undocumented sub-Saharan Africans were living in Morocco and according to Collyer, this has not changed significantly in recent years (Collyer 2006). Lahlou (2007) estimates this number to be lower between 5,000 and 6,000 individuals (estimation of September 2006). Although not all sub-Saharan African migrants living in Morocco are actually transiting to Europe, the far majority of the migrants living in informal settlements are, at least, aiming to do so. A non-representative survey among sub-Saharan African migrants in Morocco indicates that 88.7% of the migrants is heading for Europe (Lahlou 2007), at least in their heads.

Oujda is a city in East Morocco close to the Algerian border. For sub-Saharan African migrants it is one of the main entry points of the country and researchers visit it regularly to carry out transit migration related research. A considerable number of sub-Saharan African and some Asian migrants are 'waiting' here for the chance to go to Europe. Because of the dramatically intensified Spanish border control (around Ceuta and Melilla and the Andalusian coasts) many migrants heading for Europe 'get stuck' in this place. Some are even waiting for years and still want to make the final jump, others decide to settle, a far minority returns home (Collyer 2006). Many migrants in Oujda live at the university campus, a traditional no-go area for the police (because of traditional student protests), and in the so-called *tranquillos*. The latter are small-scale and often mobile communities in the forests of Oujda and in the border area with Algeria (Interview 2007).

As a response to the difficult living conditions and the lack of institutional protection, migrant communities are extremely well-organized. This is best explained by the example of the campus of the university in Oujda, where approximately 300 migrants are living. The campus ground is divided in an Anglophone and Francophone part. Within this lingual division, migrants are living in small communities (8-15 persons) based on nationality and ethnicity. Every community has its own chairman, often a person with experience in migration or someone who had a high function in the home country. The community chairmen are directed by a national chairman, and the different national chairmen are controlled by the grand chairman of the campus. With the help of this hierarchical structure information is shared, conflicts are solved and individuals protected. However, people do not always benefit from this structure. It sometimes creates power conflicts and facilitates forms of patronage, abuse and corruption (Interview 2007).

There are also examples of well-organized gangs in the region around Oujda, mainly in the border area, robbing and abusing of newly arrived migrants. A representative of a local organization mentioned kidnappings and forms of sexual exploitation of African women within the migrant communities. Furthermore, he stated that:

"Newly arrived migrants are victims of bad information. They don't know how to cross the border, so people are making misuse of that. Sometimes, they have to pay twice the price of a normal border crossing."

Thus, on the one hand the organization of migrant communities is a form of protection in which information is shared. On the other hand, these structures undermine the safety of specific migrants, mainly women and newly arrived migrants (Interview 2007).

Migrants' places and the placing of migrants

The informal camps in and around Oujda are no exception. As showed in figure 1, similar camps are to be found in South Algeria, near the Spanish enclaves in Morocco and around the city Laayoune in the Western Sahara (CIMADE 2004). Although the information of figure 1 could be out of date already, because migration routes and migrants' camps change rapidly, migrants tend to come and go to the same places (Interview 2007). Apart from the informal camps, settlements around Rabat, Tangier and Casablanca are also important places to live in for transit migrants. Besides being in Morocco, migrants are also 'waiting' in, among others, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia Mauritania, Senegal and Cape Verde (Carling 2007; Hamood 2006).

In addition to these informal settlements there are also migrant settlements set up by the authorities in which migrants are, after being apprehended, 'placed' (van Houtum and van Naerssen 2002). This confinements of unwanted migrants in closed camps, in and outside Europe, has turned into a permanent form of Agamben's 'state of exception' in which non-citizens are subject to extrajudicial acts of the state, preferably in extra-territorial spaces (Agamben 2005; Goldschmidt 2006). In this way a particular group of migrants is immobilized in its purest sense and are put, in the words of Zygmunt Bauman, in "nowhere places" as "human waste" (Bauman 2004).

'En route' communication in Africa

During their migration process, many migrants use modern communication means. Without exception, every migrant we have spoken to (in Senegal, Morocco and Spain) had a mobile phone, with which they stayed in contact with fellow migrants and family back home. In case of apprehension, the mobile phone is the first asset that is taken from the migrant (Interview 2007). Perhaps, this symbolizes at best the importance of the phone in the migration process; it is 'the way' to get in contact with people in the migration network.

A respondent in Dakar explained that the mobile phone also functions as a form of (financial) capital. After we noted he had a different, a less luxurious, phone than the last time we met him, he said:

“Yesterday, I changed it, I know this thing is useless [laughed]...but I had to change it, because I had to pay the rent of my room, so I changed my phone for a cheaper one.”

Migrants also frequently use the internet to keep in contact with their family and to facilitate the migration project: bus tickets are bought, transporters are contacted etc. (Interview 2007). Furthermore, money transfer agencies have also become important factors in the migration process. Their presence in many places en route enables migrants to receive money from their families to continue their journey. The need for migrants to communicate and receive money partly explains the emergence of ‘transit communication economies’ in the migration hubs (Lahlou 2007; van Moppes and Schapendonk 2007).

2. The migration process within Europe

This section outlines the migration process of sub-Saharan African migrants in Europe emphasizing that migration processes do not automatically end when the continent is reached. For many sub-Saharan African migrants Spain is currently one of the most popular (at least temporal) destination countries. Jobs are highly available since the agriculture and construction sectors are booming. Furthermore, the informal character of the Spanish society, compared to the more regulated Northern European countries, is assumed to be more attractive (Arango and Jachimowicz 2005).

Besides that the findings are based on interviews with sub-Saharan African migrants in Spain, Spanish organizations active in the reception of migrants (governmental and non-governmental organizations), migrant organizations and human right organizations were also important sources for information in this section.

Migration insertion phase: Entering Spain

The arrival of exhausted African migrants at the shores of the Canary Islands is widely presented by different media. Although, there are many other ways to arrive in Spain (the majority of irregular migrants enter Spain regularly on a basis of visas and become ‘visa-overstayers’ (Barrero 2006)), the migration process after irregular entry by boat is outlined. It is stated that migrants that have entered Spain via the enclaves Ceuta and Melilla have a similar ‘insertion phase’ (Interview 2007). Therefore the following section provides useful insights into the migration process of sub-Saharan transit migrants towards Spain and the continuation of the migration process after arrival in that country.

At the very first stage of arrival, medical staff members of the Spanish Red Cross provide the first humanitarian assistance to the migrants in the main points of entry at the islands. Afterwards, the police or the Guardia Civil accompanies the migrants to the so-called Centro Internamento de Extranjeros (CIE); migrant detention centers.

In the CIEs different staff members of the Red Cross (medical staff, social workers and lawyers) take care of the physical, mental and juridical status of the arrived migrants. Several security agents are present permanently, which often creates a tense atmosphere in the CIEs. These agents attempt to identify the migrants' home country so they can be repatriated (Interview 2007). Several respondents said that migrants are sometimes sent back when a country-specific accent is noticed. The authorities have 72 hours time to identify the migrants and eventually execute repatriation. They can hold the migrants in the CIE for a maximum period of forty days. After this period, the migrants are sent to the Spanish mainland with an expulsion order, which is widely ignored in that country. Lawyers and police officials make the decision where the migrants are sent to. The actual flying in of migrants to the mainland has a strong distributive character. The most important destinations are: Madrid, Barcelona and, to a lesser extent, Malaga, Valencia and Alicante. In these cities the Red Cross often takes care of the second stage of the 'reception' process. Migrants are given food, clothes and shelter for the first days. From then on, many migrants find their way in (or out of) Spain on their own. Others are given a train ticket in order to enable them to reach social contacts or supportive (migrant) organizations (Interview 2007).

After their arrival on the Spanish mainland, migrants often contact relatives or acquaintances from their home country, sometimes with the help of the Red Cross. Migrants then obtain the most relevant information, preferably on accommodation and job opportunities, through social networks (Interview 2007). Another way for migrants to receive relevant information is to get in contact with the migrant reception organizations or migrant self-organizations. In Spain we spoke to representatives of several Senegalese migrant organizations. One stated the following:

"Many Senegalese migrants know already that our organization exists before arriving in Spain. Although it is officially not the aim of the organization, we are assisting more and more migrants that have just arrived. They just knock on our door, so what can we do? We try to get in contact with their family members, we provide information about the city, and sometimes we even arrange accommodation for the first period, but we cannot assist them for a long time."

The potential role of migrant organizations in the migration process of others is confirmed by the findings of Ros et al. (2007). They state that migrant associations are potential agents in the decision making process towards emigration because: “They enjoy credibility and cultural proximity that official institutions may lack” (Ros et al. 2007).

The mobility of migrants

Once in Spain, migrants tend to be highly mobile within the Spanish state borders. A considerable number of people finds work in the direct (geographical) surroundings of their social contacts or temporal place of residence, but many others move to other regions in the country (Interview 2007).

Because the agricultural sector offers the best working opportunities, many migrants move (temporarily) to Andalusia where the sector is most extended. There, most harvests are only seasonal and migrants therefore often move synchronically with the harvests; which turns them into highly mobile actors. From February until June, they help out with picking strawberries in Huelva and from December until February with the olive harvest in Jaén, Cordoba, Granada, Malaga and Seville (see figure 2). In the province Almería the agriculture production is year round and migrants can live more structurally here (van Moppes and Schapendonk 2007).

Besides this seasonal mobility in the more rural areas, migrants can also move between urban places. We asked one Senegalese respondent why he went to Granada and not to Barcelona or Madrid, he answered the following:

”Well, for work. It is a lot easier in Granada to do this job [selling CDs as street vendor]. But I hope to go to Barcelona one day. I am from Dakar and I love the real city.”

But Barcelona is not his final goal:

“In the end I am hoping to reach Amsterdam, my sister is living there...If I had the money I would leave tomorrow!”

Another Senegalese migrant in Granada was also thinking about Barcelona as the next step in his migration process, and after Barcelona he would like to go to Paris. A Congolese man living in Madrid told us that he assisted recently a compatriot, who had been in Spain irregularly for a few weeks, with his migration process to Basle. These examples indicate that the migration process within Spain and to other European countries can have a step-by-step character, comparable with the migration process in Africa. It also shows that, despite the popularity of Spain as a destination

country, it can also function as a transit country. This shows that transit migration does exist within the borders of Europe. Again, however, it is not a simple matter of passing through one country in order to reach another. As one Cameroonian migrant in Madrid explained:

“Migration is not a fluent process. People move from place to place, if they do not find a job somewhere...they move again.”

This quote indicates that migrants compare the current place they live in with possible other places to go to. This comparison is mainly based on job opportunities and social networks. The following fragment of an interview with an Anglophone African migrant (country unknown) symbolizes the comparative character of the migration process. On the question whether he would like to stay in Madrid he answered:

“Well I don’t know. All I know is that I am here at the moment, where I will be tomorrow depends. If there is a better place to live or work in, somewhere, I will go there, of course. Migration is like that you know. You are just looking for a good place to live in.”

It is often taken for granted that a large migrant community is an important pull factor for migrants when they are comparing different optional destinations. The reality is often more complex. In Catalonia, for instance, we found a more or less saturated community. Due to the high rent prices, the small houses the settled migrants live in and the increasing number of Senegalese people coming to the region, the Senegalese community is no longer able to accommodate all newly arrived migrants. The solidarity networks have not yet disappeared completely, but changed into a different form. Instead of providing accommodation and jobs, food and clothes are distributed among the ‘new people’ (Interview 2007). This saturation could stimulate or force migrants to look for other places to go to and creates possibly unwanted and unexpected forms of transit migration.

By outlining the migration process within the EU, it is relevant to re-note the thin dividing line between transit migration and multiple or repeated migration. For a considerable number of migrants, settling in a desired destination does not mean they will not migrate again. As stated earlier, several evidence-based migration theories (cumulative causation, culture of migration) proves that “once someone migrates, the more he or she is likely to continue migrating” (Düvell 2006; DaVanzo and Morrison 1982). We found the example of a Senegalese woman who had

lived for twelve years in Italy and recently migrated to Spain, while many Senegalese people also migrate in the opposite direction. In line with this, she stated that Senegalese people move regularly between Milan and Barcelona, since many Senegalese are living in both cities. A lot of people 'commutes' between these cities. Another interesting example of African mobility within Europe is the presence of three Ghanaian men in the coast town of Roquetas del Mar (Spain). All three lived in Amsterdam for more than five years, but recently migrated to the South of Spain. One migrated with his family; the others were working only temporarily in Spain and their families were still in Amsterdam. In this perspective, one can say that African people are or can be very mobile within the borders of the EU. They move far more easily from one EU country to another because they are not attached to national identities of European countries and feel hardly any boundaries. Furthermore, as some authors argue, migrants' irregular status make them, in many cases, also more flexible than indigenous workers (Jordan and Düvell 2002). Thus Africans and also other non-EU migrants seem to be more flexible in fulfilling the EU's labor needs. This is striking since the EU is attempting to mobilize and 'flexibilize' its labor because the intra-regional mobility is relatively low, or even negligible (Fertig and Schmidt 2002; van Houtum and van der Velde 2004).

Finally, the recent exodus of a large part of the Somali community from the Netherlands to the United Kingdom also shows that, even after a relatively long stay (more than five years) in one country, migrants can decide to migrate once again (or take the next step in their migration process). A recent study in the Netherlands shows that these Somali migrants went to the United Kingdom due to a multiple set of factors. The most important were the restrictive social-economic environment and the lack of perspective regarding cultural and religious participation in The Netherlands (van den Reek and Hussein 2003). A same trend is noticed in Denmark where also a considerable number of Somali people went to the UK after having gained Danish, and thus EU, citizenship (Bang Nielsen 2004).

3. Transit migration: Spontaneous movements and their restrictions

As the above analysis show, transit migrants often use hybrid networks and create collectives in order to fulfill their migration process towards Europe. Once in Europe most of these migrants depend predominantly on their social networks, migrant communities and institutions active in the reception of migrants. However, this does not automatically undermine migrants' flexibility. In most cases migrants decide actively, when, where and how to go somewhere. They react on newly received information and, moreover, migrants are often not restricted by the presence of family members and feel little responsibility towards their (temporary) employers. This makes

them relatively 'footloose'. In addition, migrants may reshape their original plans over time; sometimes migrants decide to settle in perceived transit areas and sometimes they move away from desired destinations as in the case of saturated migrant communities and disappointing job opportunities.

As we have seen, the solidarity between migrants often ends where a migration opportunity for an individual begins, at least in the final stage before reaching Europe. In other words, migrants create collectives as a survival strategy but are flexible in fulfilling their individual aims. As one migrant expert in Dakar stated: "Many migrants have their personal behavior and common or collective behavior" (Interview 2007).

A consequence of migrants' flexibility is the unforeseeable character of their movements. As Collyer writes: "There is no linear logic to their movements. Rather they should be understood as spontaneous circulations that have developed in response to new information and new opportunities within the migrants' social networks" (Collyer 2006). We spoke to a Togolese migrant, who traveled through six countries in order to reach Morocco, and from there he was hoping to reach Europe. Once he arrived in Morocco, he heard that it was almost impossible to fulfill his plans from there, so he decided to go to Dakar where he lived for several months now. In Dakar he talked about his plan to go to Lagos (Nigeria), the next stage of his migration process.

Besides migrants' own decisions, interventions of the authorities may also contribute to the 'illogical' movements of transit migrants. One Ghanaian respondent told us that the Moroccan police had already deported him eight times, and each time he went back to the same place he got deported from. Several representatives of Spanish NGOs illustrated also that many migrants, who got repatriated from the Canary Islands try to reach Europe again, in different or similar ways.

Another explanatory factor of the flexible and non-linear routes is the lacking geographical knowledge of many migrants ("some people think that the Canary Islands are around the corner") and the role of social networks ("geographically Africans do not always know where they are going, but they do know where their networks are").⁷

Altogether, this assumes that, although several researchers have identified the most important (linear) migration routes for African migrants to go to Europe (Nyberg Sørensen 2006; de Haas 2007; van Moppes 2006), these routes are much more changeable and less straight from a micro perspective. To summarize in the words of John K. Hoppe (in van Houtum and van Naerssen 2002): "Sometimes the zigzag route is the straightest."

In the framework of migrants' spontaneous movements it is important to note that the departure areas for the final jump to Europe change dramatically in a relatively short period of time. As showed in figure 3 the EU has extended its border protection to the coast of Senegal. Although the 'border protection' (the protection activities are geographically distant from the European border) does not yet fully cover this area, like the Moroccan and the Mauritanian coast line, the Spanish and Senegalese authorities carry out intensive surveillances. As a result, the migration departure areas have shifted more southwards to the coastline of The Gambia and Guinea Conakry (Carling 2007; Kohnert 2007). This implies that, besides the individual migrant, migration networks and migration systems and their actors are very flexible as well. They react continuously and effectively on (restrictive) policy initiatives from the North. For this reason, researchers have argued against the success of the European border control. Carling, for example, clearly outlines the limitations of the Spanish high-tech border control system 'Sistema Integrado de Vigilancia Exterior' (SIVE)(Carling 2007). Even if SIVE excels in detecting and apprehending unauthorized boat migrants, it is merely one link in "the migration control chain." He emphasizes the fact that apprehended migrants must be processed on a case-by-case basis (Carling 2007). Furthermore, as stated earlier, the majority of irregular migrants enters Spain completely 'legal' and become 'illegal' overtime; others enter Spain 'illegally' but become 'legal' citizens after regularization rounds. This proves that migrants' irregular status is relative and changeable (Jordan and Düvell 2002).

The fact that transit migrants are highly flexible and move spontaneously does not mean that they are completely independent. Firstly, they depend heavily on their social networks to obtain reliable information and, in some cases, money. Moreover, as stated above, the restrictive migration policies constrain migrants in their movement. A considerable group of people end up involuntary 'stranded' in perceived transit areas, notably in North Africa. Others are apprehended and put in detention centers. These restrictive migration policies force migrants to use irregular migration means and make them (partly) dependent on smugglers and other 'third persons'. These migrant facilitators are also of vital importance for migrants since particular parts of their journey are extremely difficult to cross. All these factors undermine migrants' independency.

One factor of dependency that is not yet discussed extensively is money. When migrants do not have the financial means to pay migration facilitators they are likely to be immobile. Money is a key factor in migration, as one Cameroonian migrant in Madrid commented on his journey through Africa:

“It is definitely not easy, you can’t imagine; every day is a survival. The only thing that matters is money, for food in the first place and of course for continuing the journey... It is all about what you have in your pocket.”

In this perspective, it is important to note that there is growing awareness that migrants are not the poorest people of a specific country (Skeldon 1997; de Haas 2007). Migration is, in most cases, an expensive undertaking; in case of maritime voyages to Spain (departing from Senegal or Morocco) migrants have paid prices between \$800 and \$1900 (van Moppes and Schapendonk 2007). In comparison; a regular flight from Dakar to Madrid ranges from \$570 to \$1100.

4. Conclusion

For sub-Saharan African migrants heading for Europe their migration process is highly dynamic. Perceived transit areas may turn into (in)voluntary destinations since some migrants decide to settle in places as a second best option and others are forced to stay and are ‘waiting’ for a considerable period of time for their opportunity to make the next step of their journey. The other way around one can say that migration projects and migration processes do not automatically end when someone is living for some years in a specific place or when a desired destination is reached. For many (transit) migrants, migration consists of repeated moves and temporal settlements; their plans and aspirations as well as their migration opportunities are rather variable than fixed. In this framework I plead for a more dynamic understanding of migration. In my view, sub-Saharan African migration towards Europe should be understood in terms of mobility (and its restrictions) rather than in terms of a permanent or semi-permanent change of location. In this context I would like to finish with the words of Skeldon who states the following on migration:

“Migration, or more exactly mobility...technically, does not become ‘permanent’ until an individual reaches his or her death place, and even then...it still needs not necessarily be permanent.”⁸

(Skeldon 1997)

Figures

Figure 1: Migrants' settlements



Legenda:

- ▼ = Places of 'refoulement'
- = Detention centers in Spanish Enclaves
- ▨ = Informal camps
- = Formal detention centers in Spain
- = Informal settlements in greater cities

(Oujda = informal camp 5)

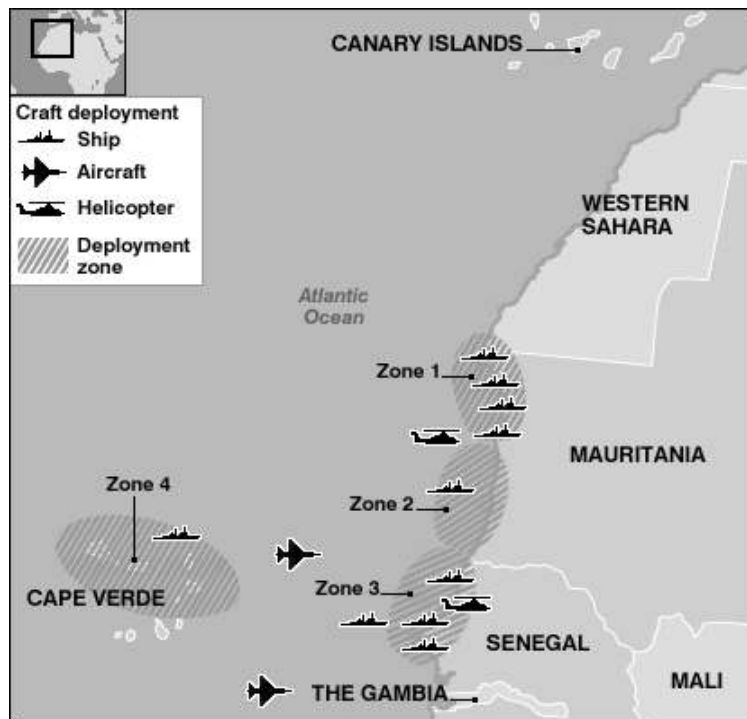
Source: AFVIC (2002): Rapport d'enquête: les migrations clandestines subsahariennes à travers l'Algérie

Figure 2: Andalusia



Source: www.paradoxplace.com

Figure 3: The EU's border protection zone



Source: BBC news: news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/5331896.stm (news message from: 10-10-2006)

Notes

¹ Here it has to be said that all three studies take into account the act of smuggling in their analysis. Therefore, it would be unjust to suggest that these studies do not include the facilitation of migration. However, I attempt to be more extended on this issue by distinguishing several facilitating actors in the migration process.

² I conducted fieldwork together with David van Moppes and I would like to thank him for his insights, efforts and company.

³ Migration hubs are here defined as important places en route where migrants are gathering, working and/or preparing their next step of their journey.

⁴ See also Nyberg Sørensen (2006) and Carling (2007).

⁵ In Niger the term ghetto is used to describe the areas in which foreign migrants are accommodated separated by nationality.

⁶ Piso Patera literally means “Patera Floor” referring that these people are living together as neighbors of a same floor of an apartment.

⁷ Quotes from an interview with a migration scholar in Dakar (Senegal).

⁸ With the last part of this sentence Skeldon refers to the repatriations of death bodies to “home areas”.

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